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Changing Trends in Israel - Turkey Security and Military Relations: Their Perspectives

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Synopsis: This article analyzes the changing trends in the military and security relations between Turkey and Israel. It identifies factors of the operational environment that influence bilateral relations and includes a thorough discussion of each of the factors from a Turkish and Israeli perspective. It argues that relations are a product of the structural changes in the two countries' operational environments.

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Changing Trends in Israel-Turkey Security and Military Relations: Their Perspectives

Introduction

Relations between Turkey and Israel have witnessed many fluctuations since their inception in the early 1990s. These fluctuations cannot be explained by looking at certain events, personalities of Turkish or Israeli leaders; or even by studying bilateral relations alone. The relationship is dictated more by the stance of either of the two countries, toward third parties. More importantly, relations are a product of the structural changes in the two countries' operational environments. In order to decipher Turkish-Israeli relations and make informed predictions on where the partnership is headed, one must first look at the changing operational environment in the region since the nineties. What was the operational environment in the region at the time that led to a rapprochement between Turkey and Israel? How did that environment effect Turkish and Israeli calculations for a military and security partnership? What are the factors that affect the fluctuations in relations? How are these factors and the operational environment changing and what can we expect to see in this bilateral relationship going forward? This article will examine these at length, and lay out the factors that affect relations, discussing them from Turkey's and Israel's perspectives.

A Brief History of the Changing Relations

Turkey and Israel started developing security and military relations beginning in the early 1990s. The operational environment that brought them closer took shape with the 1991 Gulf War, which was a particularly important trigger for the rapprochement. Turkey and Israel were on the same page regarding the necessity of the war and their support for the U.S. In addition, the Oslo Peace Process removed a previously severe stumbling block in Turkey-Israel relations and created a conducive environment for rapprochement.¹ The security and intelligence-based cooperation which started in the early 90's were a reflection of the circumstances of the time; along with the needs and interests of each country, as explained below.

At that time, Turkey was fighting a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism war against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). In addition, it was faced with two hostile neighbors, Iran and Syria, who had decided to provide logistical support to the PKK. Their calculation was that this move would give them a bargaining chip in their dealings with Turkey and force the resolution of their issues with Turkey. Syria's issues consisted of the sharing of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Iran, as an Islamic theocracy, represented an ideological opposition to Turkey's secular democracy. Turkey suspected that Iran was supporting radical Islamic groups such as Hezbollah, and others which were trained in or financed by Iran, to engage in terrorist acts in Turkey.² Syria and Iran had decided to work together against Turkey and Turkey quickly

realized that diplomatic negotiations with Syria and Iran were futile. Thus, the decision to create a “Turkey-Israel axis” was meant as a counterbalance to the “Iran-Syria axis” in the region. In July 1999, the Turkish Prime Minister’s office declared Turkey’s rapprochement with Israel as having become a necessity due to “Arab nations’ hostile actions towards Turkey, and their allegiance to Syria despite Syria’s support to the PKK.”³ From the Israeli side, it was beneficial to establish close relations with Turkey and its military. It enabled Israel to break its isolation in the Middle East; and the Israeli Air Force gained the chance to train in Turkish skies.

In addition, The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) was in need of modernization, know-how and equipment during the second half of the 1980’s and was in search of new resources. During this time, Turkey and Israel started cooperating on air force projects. In 1989, Israel took the first steps in helping the Turkish Air Force modernize its F-4’s. That year, *Israel Military Industries* also submitted a proposal to modernize the Turkish M-60 tanks. In 1994, Israel offered to sell Turkey the KC-135 tanker flights, which Turkey had been trying to get from the U.S.⁴ A report in 1994, prepared by the TAF Commander Halis Burhan, noted that “Israel is ready for any kind of help against the PKK ‘as requested’ and that a military alliance with Israel would improve the TAF’s operations significantly.”⁵ These military projects started taking effect in 1996, and represented an important resource in Turkey’s efforts to obtain high technology weapons.

The partnership with Israel contributed to Turkey’s rising influence and weight in the region in the post Cold War period. Though Arab countries in the region were initially wary of this alliance, eventually they realized that Turkey was not going to use this against the Palestinians’ interest, giving the Arabs some comfort. In time, Arab countries realized that Turkey’s influence over Israel might be something they could use to their advantage and started viewing this alliance in a more positive light.⁶ In fact, during periods when the peace process has stalled, there has consistently been an increase in the diplomatic traffic towards Ankara, showing that Turkey has an important role to play in talking to Israel. During the difficult days of the Second Intifada, Palestinian Authority’s then-representative from Jerusalem Sari Nusseibeh had urged Turkish diplomats to be “soft” with Israel, indicating that Palestinians viewed Turkey as a much needed player to be turned to in case things got out of hand; and that they wanted that door to remain open. Similarly, during the days following the infamous 2010 “flotilla crisis” between Israel and Turkey, Nusseibeh said, “Israel needs Turkey, and thus Turkey has persuasive bargaining power over Israel. Israel needs a Muslim voice that it can view as one that is a safe haven as opposed to its feeling of being surrounded by enemies. That voice should be Turkey. Right now, the only thing that the Israeli public think about when they hear the words, ‘Muslim country’ is war and suicide bombings. Turkey must come into the picture to calm the waters and provide a platform for peace.”⁷

Within this framework, one can now begin to discuss the transformation of the strategic circumstances/ operational environment of the region. With Syria ending its war on Turkey in

1999, relations between Turkey and Damascus started recovering steadily as of 2000, eliminating one of the reasons for Turkey's "rapprochement" with Israel.⁸ In 2002, the domestic environment in Turkey changed, and the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. In the wake of the 2003 Iraq war, and with Turkey's new government under the AKP, a new vision began to take shape regarding Turkish foreign policy: Turkey would try to engage all the parties in the region, bolster Turkey's economic prospects and create a zone of economic integration and regional stability. It would do this by playing up its cultural and historical ties with Muslims, the Balkans, Central Asians, Arabs and Europeans. As a result, Turkey engaged all its neighbors, including Syria and Iran. It managed to bring Israel and Syria to the table for proxy negotiations. It offered to mediate between the U.S. and Iran on nuclear matters.⁹ Basically, Turkey's new foreign policy of "zero problems with our neighbors" was geared towards the goal of emerging as a regional leader in the Middle East and playing an important role as a mediator in some of the region's toughest conflicts.

AKP's new foreign policy, which required engagement with its Arab neighbors, necessitated a more vocal criticism of Israel and a more sensitive tone to the Palestinian issue. In addition, the Oslo Peace Process, which had enabled relations to flourish, started stalling following the Al Aksa Intifada in 2000.¹⁰ Israel's decision to continue building settlements instead of reviving the peace process, followed by its attack on Lebanon in 2006, then on Gaza at the end of 2008, continuing into early 2009, caused Turkey to become critical of Israel. Relations hit a critical low during the "flotilla crisis" of May 2010, when a flotilla led by an Islamic charity organization, which challenged Israel's blockage of Gaza was met by an Israeli raid on international waters, killing nine Turkish civilians. That is where relations are at today, though they have recovered somewhat from the 'rock bottom' point following the 'flotilla crisis,' due to both sides' efforts at damage control. In order to understand where the relationship is headed, one must look at the factors of the operational environment from each country's perspective.

Aspects of the Operational Environment that Effect Bilateral Relations

- **The Palestinian Issue: There is correlation between the progress in the peace process and Turkish-Israeli relations. This first became apparent in the 1990's and continues to hold true today.**

Turkey's Perspective: Due to Turkey's historical and religious ties with the Palestinians, Turkey is more easily able to maintain good relations with Israel at times when there is at least some platform for moving forward in negotiations or a peace process. In contrast, when relations are strained between Israel and the Palestinians, this drives a wedge between Turkish-Israeli relations. This is because it becomes difficult for Ankara to justify to its engagement with Israel, to its constituents. It thus leads Turkey to take a critical line against Israel, siding with Palestinians. In addition, Turkey's new-found emphasis on stability, peace and economic

integration dictates it to be against the use of force. This effects everything from how Turkish politicians vehemently attack Israel's policies towards the Palestinians; and how the Turkish media always reports Israeli attacks on Palestinians, but rarely covers Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel.¹¹

Israel's Perspective: Israel is aware that the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly the outbreak of the second *Intifada* in the fall of 2000, and the more recent conflict with Hamas in Gaza severely damaged Israel's image in Turkey. However, Israel perceives the Turkish media's reporting on the Palestinian issue to be biased and unfair, against Israel.¹² In contrast, the Israeli media reports fighting between the Turkish army and the PKK from the Turkish point of view, and rarely shows any sympathy to the PKK.¹³ The contrast stems from the fact that there is an inherent asymmetry in relations, which is perceived more on the Israeli side. Israel perceives itself as the "junior" partner in relations with Turkey, due to its perception of being "encircled" with enemies, and Turkey being its only friendly Muslim country in its region. It is thus a critical part of Israeli foreign policy to maintain diplomatic ties with Turkey – a Muslim country with international stature and regional power, along with potential for regional leadership – as an ally.

Israel perceives that Turkish politicians, especially Prime Minister Erdoğan uses any discord between Israel and the Palestinians to fuel the discourse of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic expressions in the media and among the Turkish public. Erdoğan's declarations such as one that came after Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli offensive against Hamas in the winter of 2008-2009, when he accused Israel of committing "crimes against humanity"¹⁴ contribute to the spread of anti-Israeli sentiments among the Turkish public. Erdoğan's harsh criticism of Israel for its policy in the territories in general and in Operation Cast Lead in particular changed Turkey's status in Israel, from that of a close friend to that of an almost-enemy. Israel attributed Erdoğan's criticism to the pan-Islamic slant of Turkey's ruling party, the country's growing ties with Iran and the aim of Turkey and Syria to replace their Western allies with Arab ones.¹⁵

In contrast, Israel respects Turkish sensitivities on the Armenian issue,¹⁶ and has lobbied in Washington against the prospect of U.S. recognition of the Armenian massacres as genocide.¹⁷ Israel's traditional approach to the events of 1915 between the Ottoman government and the Ottoman Armenians has been one of silence and non-recognition.

- **Turkish Domestic and Foreign Policy: The rise of the AKP, its new foreign policy of "zero problems with our neighbors"; and Turkey's ambitions to become a regional leader have influenced bilateral relations.**

Turkey's Perspective: Turkey's new foreign policy of "zero problems with our neighbors" is designed with a view to establish Turkey as a regional leader, with good relations with all actors in the Middle East. This has required playing up Turkey's Muslim identity in an effort to have common ground with the Arab countries in the region. Thus, every time Israel attacks Gaza, this indirectly undermines Turkey's potential for such a role, because it forces Turkey to distance itself from Israel and side with the Palestinians. In general, Turkey views that it is better to engage Syria, Iran and Hamas than to isolate them.

With its newfound role in the region, Turkey has taken on the task of bringing Israel and Syria to the table through proxy negotiations.¹⁸ Turkey has been very proud of this initiative and has viewed it as a potential step in its role as a key country in the region. However, the Israeli offensive against Hamas, 'Operation Cast Lead' which came in December of 2008, was a traumatic experience for the Turks. First, because of their perceived historical, religious and emotional ties with the Muslims of Palestine; and second, because it came right on the heels of Turkish efforts to mediate between Israel and Syria, ruining chances of success for a move which would secure Turkey's position as an important regional power and mediator in the region.¹⁹ The timing was particularly unfortunate from the Turkish perspective: It came only a few days after a potential milestone in the proxy negotiations, right after Syrian President had declared his willingness to hold direct talks with Israel, and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had come to Turkey to discuss the issue with Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan.²⁰ With such critical developments unfolding thanks to Turkish efforts, the offense came as a slap in the face to Turkish leaders. The Turkish anger that was displayed in Erdoğan's comments and in the public mood was a reaction to Israel's obliteration of the regional environment which had brought Turkey to a role in which it could have become a regional hero, as a mediator and facilitator. The Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan felt personally betrayed by the Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and felt that he had been taken for a ride.²¹ He said, "At a time when we have been working so hard for peace, the fact that Israel has chosen this path, is a severe blow to peace and peace initiatives... Today, I was thinking of calling Prime Minister Olmert to discuss Israel-Syria negotiations, but now I have cancelled that and I won't be calling him. Because this is a disrespectful move against us."²²

The Gaza offensive against Hamas in late 2008 through early 2009 damaged relations significantly. The Turkish side reacted very harshly, calling Israel's actions a 'crime against humanity' and demanding that Israel be excluded from the UN for disregarding their call to stop the fighting in Gaza.²³ On top of this, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, during the World Economic Forum in January 2009, walked out of a debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos.²⁴ His actions made him a hero in the eyes of the Gazans, Iranians and Syrians.

The 'flotilla incident' of May 31, 2010 can be seen in a similar light. From Turkey's perspective, the timing of the incident was again very unfortunate. The incident came right

before the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was scheduled to meet Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in New York to discuss the details of the proxy negotiations between Israel and Syria.²⁵ In addition, the loss of nine Turkish civilians' life by an ally, was unprecedented. Turkey came to the brink of breaking relations with Israel. The harshness of the language used by Turkish authorities against Israel was seen as an extension of the increasingly antagonistic rhetoric which started around the Israeli assault against Gaza in December 2008. Many Turks felt disappointed by the muted international reaction to the murder of nine individuals (eight Turks and one Turkish-American) on board the ship Mavi Marmara by Israeli commandos. Turkish authorities reacted harshly to the killing of the civilians on board the ship and incited fury among an already enraged population. Prime Minister Erdoğan said that he considered Hamas to be a resistance movement and not a terrorist organization.²⁶

The foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, in an interview with Newsweek, summarized accurately what the national sentiment was on this: "Nine civilians were murdered on the high seas. Are we going to voice objection when human rights are violated by and Eastern or Muslim country but remain silent when Israel violates human rights? If this double standard is a Western value, then we are not for it."²⁷ Along the same lines, Turkish experts express disappointment over the fact that the flotilla incident has once again led to the question of whether the West is "losing" Turkey. Turkey considers Israel to be a unique and special case in the international community, and argue that Turkey's relations with Israel should not be a defining factor when evaluating Turkey's policies.²⁸

Israel's Perspective: Israel, on the other hand, views that it has made it clear that it accepts Ankara's ambitions to play a leading role in the Middle East, by agreeing to allow it to hold proxy mediations between Israel and Syria. Following the Davos incident, the Israeli side was extremely concerned with Turkish public and media sentiments which included anti-Semitic attacks and demonstrations in Turkey. Israel views that the mildly Islamic AKP in Turkey has played on these sentiments to mobilize support for Turkish local elections which were coming up in March 2009. In addition, Israel views that the new AKP government has made reforms which have increased civilian control over the military. On this, the view from Israel is that the main actor driving the bilateral alliance was the Turkish military; who lost its hold over the political system and thus its ability to dictate foreign policy moves.²⁹

From Israel, it appears that Turkey's approach toward it have been defined by two simultaneous developments – the AKP's rise to power in 2002, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. These have led to Turkey's new vision for, and its role in, the Middle East. Israel views the AKP as following a policy of using Islam as a platform for advancing its position as a regional leader. As such, it is concerned of Turkey's newfound role as the "glue" between the three major nationalities in the region – Turkish, Arab and Iranian.³⁰ In addition, Israel observes that Turkey is striving to increase its stature in the Muslim world, leading it to engage with, and grant

legitimacy to Hamas. Israel knew that relations may never be the same when Turkey extended an invitation to Hamas's senior personality Khalid Mash'al to Ankara in 2006.³¹ Although Turkey has tried to make a case that it is in a unique position to engage with such actors for the sake of regional peace, it still concerns Israel that its former ally is engaging with Hamas.

- **As Turkey has become friendlier with its neighbors, its incentive to create a Turkey-Israel “axis” to “counter” an Iran-Syria “axis” declined. However, its ambition to become a regional mediator requires it to have good diplomatic ties with Israel.**

Turkey's Perspective: As a result of its new foreign policy, Turkey has established warm relations with its neighbors, including Syria, Iran and Iraq. In the past, these countries' support to the PKK had driven the Turks to create a “Turkey-Israel” balance to counter their role. However, as this situation has changed, so has Turkey's enthusiasm for cooperation with Israel. From the perspective of Turkey, instead of regarding Israel as an “ally” or axis against Syria (or a Syria-Iran axis), it has re-defined its role as one of mediator between Syria and Israel. However, for Turkey to have good relations with Syria, and to be a ‘mediator’ in the region, it needs to have leverage over Israel. Thus, the incentive to have a relationship with Israel is still there, though for a different reason.

Israel's Perspective: Turkey's improved relations with Syria and Iran is very concerning, and gives Turkey considerable leverage over Israel. Israel realizes that as the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria increases, there is a decrease in Turkey's cooperation with Israel. However, it also recognizes and appreciates Turkey's ambitions to become a regional ‘mediator’ and knows that Turkey needs to continue its diplomatic ties with Israel in order to achieve this goal. Indeed, following the ‘flotilla’ crisis on May 31, 2010, when relations came close to the brink of collapse, Syria conveyed to Turkey the message that it needed a Turkey which had Israel's ear, as opposed to one which had lost diplomatic ties with Israel.³² In addition, during his visit to Spain in July of 2010, Syrian President Beşar Esad has said that a Turkey with no ties to Israel would be useless for regional peace and make mediation initiatives difficult.³³

- **Israeli Domestic Politics: The rise of right-wing political parties which take a hard line on the Palestinian issue have affected relations.**

Turkey's Perspective: Turkey views Israeli domestic politics, in particular the rise of right-wing parties in Israel, as a critical factor in bilateral relations, and one which fails to get mentioned.³⁴ From the Turkish side, it seems that Israeli scholars' analysis of the relations are typically focused on Turkish developments, ignoring Israel's role in them and attributing them to “Turkey's Islamization,” which Turkey considers misleading. Turkey is aggrieved by analyses that attempt to explain its relations with Israel in the context of personalities, characters,

comments and single events. In addition, Turks are very tired of having their issues analyzed through the binary “secular” vs. “Islamic” dichotomy. This is an inaccurate and misleading lens to use in trying to understand Turkey: The “moderately Islamic” AKP was initially the proponent of opening Turkish markets to Israeli businesses and capital. In addition, until Israel’s 2008-2009 assault on Gaza, the AKP government went out of its way to build good relations with Israel. AKP leaders visited Israel many times and the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan paid respects at Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. The AKP government signed more agreements with Israel than any previous Turkish government had.³⁵ Turkish analysts argue that the problems in the bilateral relationship should also analyze fluctuations in Israeli domestic politics and Israeli ‘militarism.’ A Turkish political pundit, Taha Akyol, who is a columnist for the daily *Milliyet (Nationality)* newspaper characterizes this as follows:

“Israel is an example of an unstable democracy. The political parties, several of which are yet to be institutionalized, are not strong. There is no stable electoral support. Big parties crumble into small ones, and a small party can rise to being the leading one. In such an unstable democracy, moderate policies have no chance of gaining societal support. The weakness of political parties contributes to Israeli militarism, which radicalizes the masses. Did not the Kadima activate the Gaza massacre to garner votes?”³⁶

Israel’s Perspective: In the same way that Turkey views Israeli domestic politics and the need to garner votes as a factor that dictates Israel’s moves on the Palestinian issue; Israel perceives that Turkish politicians (particularly Prime Minister Erdoğan) use the Palestinian issue, to fuel public sentiment against Israel in Turkey and gather support for the AKP’s controversial moves regarding hosting Hamas, and engaging with Iran and Syria. The rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel demonstrations in Turkey are very concerning to Israel. Israel is concerned with Turkish politicians’ presentation of the Palestinian issue to the Turkish public. This affects public opinion in Turkey, and increases the level of public resentment against Israel, feeding into Turkish politicians’ rhetoric and eventually Turkey’s stance on Israel, becoming a vicious cycle.

- **Military cooperation between Israel and Turkey is important to both sides and both will endeavor to practice damage control after crises erupt.**

Turkey’s Perspective: Turkey appreciates military know-how it gains from Israel, in dealing with the PKK. The Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak visited Turkey just days before the onset of large-scale operations against PKK bases in Iraq at the beginning of 2008. The Turkish Defense Minister Vecdi Gönül subsequently revealed that Turkey had benefited greatly from Israeli military know-how in its actions against the PKK, referring to the use of Israeli made UAVs.³⁷ In fact, even when diplomatic relations hit rock bottom following the ‘flotilla incident,’ military relations quietly continued. Within weeks of the flotilla raid, a Turkish military delegation arrived in Israel to learn how to operate the same pilotless aircraft often used

by Israel to hunt Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip. The \$190 million deal for the drones was not canceled, even as the Israeli instructors in Turkey were called home after the raid.³⁸

Israel's Perspective: From Israel's perspective, it is extremely important to maintain the military partnership with Turkey. Several Israeli fighter planes train at the Konya Airbase in Turkey yearly, and both countries conduct joint naval exercises with the participation of American warships in the Mediterranean.³⁹ The two countries also share intelligence. Israel must appreciate intelligence it receives from Turkey on Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Asia – regions that are hard for Israel to reach/gather intelligence from.⁴⁰ Doron Abrahami, consul for economic affairs at the Israeli Consulate in Istanbul, noted that before the flotilla clash, Israel's military industry had teamed up with a Turkish partner to help modernize a fleet of 170 Turkish tanks in a project valued at \$700 million.⁴¹ In addition, the two countries currently have 16 arms deals, including a \$5 billion contract for 1,000 Merkava Mark III main battle tanks designed by Israel Military Industries; a \$50 million upgrade of Turkey's M-60 tanks, an \$800 million deal for two Israeli patrol aircraft and an Airborne Warning and Control System Jet. Turkey was also planning a \$625.5 million deal for 54 McDonnell Douglas F-4E Phantom strike aircraft to be upgraded to Phantom 2020 standard, and a \$75 million program to upgrade 48 of the air forces' 87 Northrop F-5/F-5B fighter-bombers as lead-in trainers.⁴² Thus both militaries have an incentive to prevent crises from erupting out of control.

- **Iran and Iraq are causes for concern for both countries, and common denominators which keep the bilateral relationship going.**

Turkey's Perspective: Despite the appearance that Turkey and Iran are friendly, Turkish officials dread the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and the alteration in the regional balance of power that would come with such a development.⁴³ In addition, the idea of having a border with a nuclear Iran brings concerns regarding becoming a possible transit route for the leakage of nuclear materials and technology. Turkish leaders do not like the idea of having a nuclear Iran on their border. However, their approach to preventing such a development is one of engagement and persuasion. Turkey voted "No" to imposing additional sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council in June 2010. Turkey worries that a new round of UN sanctions against Iran would damage the Turkish economy and the region's stability.⁴⁴ The Turkish government's argument was that the no vote was necessary to keep Iran from leaving the negotiating table. Turkish leaders like to reiterate that Turkey has the "unique" position of having good relations with Iran and the West. They argue that a Turkey which has influence over Iran is better for NATO and the West. In addition, Turkey vehemently opposes any military action against its neighbor. On the Iraq issue, Turkey is concerned that a possible disintegration of Iraq which may give birth to an autonomous 'Kurdistan', would encourage its Kurds to move in the same direction.

Israel's Perspective: Despite their common concern over Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, Israel views that it is doing “the dirty job,” by being vocal about its concerns on the issue; while Ankara appears to side with Iran, due to its wishes to remain on good terms with Tehran.⁴⁵ Though Israel is also against Iran's nuclear program, their view of preventing this is different than Turkey's. Tel Aviv sees Iran as a threat to its survival and wishes to isolate the Islamic Republic and even threaten to bomb it to preempt it from becoming a nuclear power.⁴⁶ On the issue of the possible disintegration of Iraq, Turkey and Israel share common concerns regarding the potential negative impacts of Iraq's disintegration into three distinct states. In both Israel's and Turkey's views, such a development would destabilize the region. In addition, as Turkey fears that a Kurdish state in northern Iraq would encourage its own Kurds, Israel fears that such a development would encourage its Palestinians against Israel.

What are the Stakes for Washington?

One final thing to consider when discussing the changing Turkish-Israeli relationship is the role of the U.S. From Washington's perspective, it is very important that Turkish-Israeli relations continue, as a balance against Shia Iran's increasing influence in the region, following Operation Iraqi Freedom. Washington is concerned about a possible power vacuum in the region following its departure from Iraq and would like Iran's advantageous position in the region to be balanced by Israel and Turkey. Washington is exerting a lot of energy to make sure that problems between what it considers to be the two most important military powers in the region, Turkey and Israel, do not get out of control, with the view that Iran's presence in Iraq must be contained, and Iran's influence on Lebanon be limited. In fact, when relations came to the verge of breaking down, right after the flotilla incident, Washington did all it could to prevent this.

One of Turkey's pre-requisites for continuing diplomatic ties with Israel was the return of the flotilla members detained in Israel, and the return of the bodies on the ship, which Washington ensured that Israel complied with.⁴⁷ Another one of Turkey's demands was the establishment of an independent UN commission to investigate the flotilla incident. The U.S. put pressure on Israel to comply with such a commission. This became an important turning point, from which relations came back from the brink. Ankara perceived Israel's compliance with the commission and investigation as a positive development.

As a prognosis, one can predict that despite occasional crises, Ankara's desire to become a regional leader and mediator requires it to continue its diplomatic relations with Israel. As an aspiring potential mediator, Turkey must be a credible and trustworthy ally to all the countries involved in the conflicts it aims to help resolve.⁴⁸ High ranking Turkish officials, particularly Prime Minister Erdoğan's harsh comments against Israel make it difficult for Israel to view Turkey as a credible mediator. If Turkey wants to maintain its role of mediator in the region, it cannot continue to adopt such a harsh stance against Israel.

The problem in this relationship is that Turkey and Israel have few common denominators when it comes to the issue of Palestine due to Turkey's historical and religious ties to Palestine. In particular, each time the Palestinian problem unfolds in a way that leads to humanitarian dimensions, the tensions between Israel and Turkey will rise. The flotilla incident is just another reminder of this reality. Despite the limiting effect that the Palestinian issue plays on relations, there are plenty of other issues where the two countries' interests do intersect, the most important one being the concern over the power vacuum in Iraq following the U.S. departure. In addition, there is the common interest in containing Iran's influence in the region and preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons, even though the two countries have different approaches on how to go about this. Currently both sides appear to be taking stock and practicing damage control, suggesting that they are aware of the importance of the bilateral relationship for their interests and the region's.

¹ Turkey's relations with Israel had previously been ambivalent, because of the Palestine question. The Oslo peace process provided the necessary legitimacy for the shifting of the relationship into one of strategic alignment.

² "Iranian Terrorist Connection Once Again on the Agenda," *Turkish Daily News*, 13 July 2000.

³ "Başbakan'dan Dış Politikaya İnce Ayar (The Prime Minister Calibrates Foreign Policy)," *Milliyet*, 13 July 1999.

⁴ Neviz Tavlâş, "Türk İsrail Güvenlik ve İstihbarat İlişkileri (Security and Intelligence Relations between Turkey and Israel)," *Avrasya Dosyası*, C.5, No.1, 1999, p.93.

⁵ Evren Değer, "İsrail'le İşbirliği Raporu (Report on Cooperation with Israel)," *Milliyet*, 16 February 1995.

⁶ Gencer Özkan, "Mavi Marmara Bunalımında Sonun Başlangıcına Doğru (Towards the Beginning of the End in the Mavi Marmara Crisis)," *Ortadoğu Analiz (Middle Eastern Analysis)*, September 2010, Vol.2, No.21.

⁷ "İsrail'e Yumuşak Davranın (Be Soft to Israel)," *Hürriyet*, 13 April 2010.

⁸ Friction between Turkey and Syria over the sharing of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers have given way to talk about joint irrigation strategies.

⁹ "Turkish Leader Volunteers to be U.S.-Iran Mediator," *New York Times*, 12 November 2008.

¹⁰ Prof. Dr. Gencer Özcan, "Aynalar Galerisi: Türkiye-İsrail İlişkilerinde Yansımalar, Yanılsamalar, ve Gerçekler (The Hall of Mirrors: Reflections, Illusions and Realities in Turkish Israeli Relations)," *Ortadoğu Analiz (Middle Eastern Analysis)*, June 2010, Vol.2, No.18.

¹¹ Ofra Bengio, "Altering Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: A View from Israel," *Insight Turkey*, Vol.11, No. 2, p.46.

¹² Ibid. p.54. Ofra Bengio claims that the Turkish media hardly mentioned the Qassam missile attacks launched from Gaza on southern Israeli communities for eight years, while dwelling at length on Israeli attacks on the launchers of the missiles.

¹³ Ibid. p. 46.

¹⁴ "Başbakan'ın Sert Tepkisi İsrail Basınında (The Prime Minister's Harsh Reaction in the Israeli Press)," *Habervakti*, 29 December 2008.

¹⁵ "Resuming the Turkish Track," *Haaretz*, 25 November 2009.

¹⁶ The "genocide" in question occurred during World War I while Ottoman Turks fought Russian forces in Eastern Europe. Turkish and Armenian accounts of the events differ significantly.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.47. Israel's stance on the so called "Armenian Genocide" is two-fold. One, it aims to help an ally. Second, many in Israel hold the opinion that the term 'genocide' could not be applied to anyone except the unique case of genocide against Jews under the Nazis.

¹⁸ "Erdoğan, İsrail-Suriye Barışı İçin Aracı Olmuş (Erdoğan is a Mediator for Peace between Israel and Syria)," *Milliyet*, 31 March 2008.

¹⁹ İlker Aytürk, "Between Crisis and Cooperation: The Future of Turkish-Israeli Relations," *Insight Turkey*, Vol.11, No. 2, p.61.

²⁰ "İsrail-Suriye Barış Görüşmesi Türkiye'de (Israel-Syria Peace Talks in Turkey)," *Milliyet*, 22 May 2008.

²¹ Soli Özel, "Turkey-Israel Relations: Where to Next?," German Marshall Fund's *On Turkey* series, 3 March 2010.

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- ²² “Bize Karşı Saygısızlık (Disrespect for Us),” *Hürriyet*, 28 December 2008.
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